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SERI BLUE

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ABSTRACT

The blue which the Seri Indians of Sonora, Mexico, use in face painting is not the mineral dumortierite, as previously believed, but is a prepared pigment. This paper is a description of the process in which three elements are combined to produce this pigment.

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McGee and Kroeber reported the mineral dumortierite as the source of the blue pigment used in Seri face painting (McGee 1898: 165-6; Kroeber 1931: 27). Coolidge described two blues, one a mixture of gypsum and a boiled root, the other a blue stone found on Tiburon Island (Coolidge 1939: 200). Xavier mentioned dumortierite and commercial bluing. She also referred to a third blue obtained from a plant on Tiburon (Xavier 1946). Present investigation has shown that as far as the Seri know, the only blues they have ever used are *ika?óil* "to cause to be blue" (commercial bluing) and the highly prized *?antezj kóil* "blue clay" of their own manufacture.[1]

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The components and the method of manufacture of *?antezj kóil* are said to have been taught to the women long ago by *?ant i?akímxoj* "they who tell the things about the earth." The actual color transformation is veiled in mystery to the Seri who say that if the process of making the clay is observed by any girl who has not passed the menarche, the blue will not appear. Its appearance is not attributed to shaman power, however.

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?antezj kóil has been in less demand during the last few decades since commercial bluing has been readily available. Nevertheless, *?antezj kóil* is the blue preferred by those women who continue to adorn their faces in the traditional manner.

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The three ingredients used in making the blue clay are the root bark of *xkoktz (Franseria dumosa)*, *iki kóizj* "to grind with" (a mixed clay in which montmorillonitic layers predominate), and *mokni óoxW* "excrement (sap) of *mókni (Guaiacum coulteri)*." The Seri say that the *iki kóizj* and the *mókni* are found only on Tiburon Island. The root bark of *tinkl (Franseria ambrosioides* Cav.) or of *xneejan siiktoj (Stegnospermum halimifoliam)* can be used instead of *xkoktz*. *tinkl* gives a distinct aroma to the clay. The plants mentioned are fairly common along the Sonoran coast.*

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: It is interesting to note that none of the ingredients is blue in its unaltered state.

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Recently I observed the manufacture of *?antezj kóil* in Desemboque, Sonora. Although the woman involved normally makes the clay in complete privacy, she agreed to let me watch. Seven young men and two young women were near a fire outside her hut as she seated herself on the ground behind a water drum. As she began to work she cautioned them not to watch.[3]

She commenced by scraping several roots of *xkoktz* to remove any dirt and then moistened them with water. Using a mano and metate, she split the bark and removed it. The rest of the root was discarded. She then pounded the bark into a pulp, moistening it at the same time with more water (Fig. 1). This pulp was put in a cup and set to one side.[4]

Next she ground several small chunks of *iki kóizj* into a fine powder. Then she placed a piece of hard *mokni óoxW*, the size of a marble, on the white powder. At this point she told her daughter, one of the two young women, to bring her a clean white rag and a blanket. After again warning the young people to stay away, she covered herself and her metate with the blanket, leaving only a small opening by her shoulder through which I could observe. The warning was heeded by all of the youths except the daughter who came over once to take a peek. The group remained interested, and several times someone asked, "Is it blue yet?"

Beneath the blanket, the woman ground the *mokni óoxW* into the *iki kóizj*, mixing the powders thoroughly. After scraping the mixture to one side of the metate, she wrapped the bark pulp in the white cloth and squeezed approximately ½ teaspoonful of liquid onto the center of the stone. Then she combined some of the powder with the liquid and ground the resultant paste for about ten minutes. As necessary, she added more powder or liquid to the mixture. Finally she daubed a streak of the clay onto the back of her hand, withdrew her hand into the sunlight, and remarked that it was beginning to turn blue. At that time it was a grayish-blue. She continued to work for several more minutes and then tested the color again. This time she seemed satisfied that it was the right shade. It was now a bright, or as she put it, a strong blue. This was the *?antezj kóil*, the prized blue pigment (Fig. 2).

The making of the *?antezj kóil* is followed immediately by the making of a second portion of clay, called *?a?óoskl*, which is a lighter shade of blue. Thus its name, the root meaning of which is "drab or grayish." *?a?óoskl* is considered to be inferior to the *?antezj kóil*. After the woman had scraped the finished *?antezj kóil* from the metate and mano and transferred it to a saucer, she added more ground *iki kóizj* to the small amount of remaining

FIG. 1. Crushing the root bark of zkoktz (*Fraxserria dumosa*), to a pulp. Note the pieces of root in the left foreground, the little pieces of mákni óoxW sap (*Guaiacum coulteri*) in the center foreground, and the chunks of mineral in the right foreground.

FIG. 2. The first or brighter batch of blue pigment, ?oxterj hóll.

powder mixture and combined this with the blue clay remains on the metate. She then squeezed a few more drops of liquid from the cloth-covered bark pulp onto the powder and resumed the grinding and mixing. After working several minutes she scraped up the second batch of clay and placed it opposite the *?antezj kóil* on the saucer. Only then did she drop the blanket and display the results of her work. The pastes were soft and sticky, and the difference in the shades of blue was noticeable. She said that on the following day she would form the clay into the proper shapes.

The next day she kneaded and molded each of the two masses, which by that time had dried enough to be workable. She molded the *?antezj kóil* into two capsule-shaped pieces, each about an inch long and tapered at both ends. The *?a?óoskl* she molded into a disk about one-fourth inch thick and almost an inch in diameter (Fig. 3). The different shape permits it to be distinguished from the *?antezj kóil*. Although both blues are made at a single sitting, the process is spoken of only as "making *?antezj kóil*."[4]

FIG. 3. The two capsule shaped pellets are *?antezj kóil*. The disk-shaped pellet is *?a?óoskl*.

To use the clay as paint, a bit of water is placed on a stone and the clay is rubbed into it to make a paste. It is then applied to the face (Fig. 4). It spreads smoothly and adheres firmly to the skin. The blue was formerly used for decorating pottery, clay figurines, headdresses, fetishes, arrows, wrist guards, and cane gaming sticks, as well as for face painting. In curing the sick, the shaman sometimes used the blue for painting crosses on the patient's chest. Also, women made necklaces using beads formed from the blue clay.

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FIG. 4. Painting the face with ...e finished pigment.

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NOTES

104 386 114 1. The phonetic values of the symbols used are the following: t is voiceless dental stop; k is vl. velar stop; ? is glottal stop; W is vl. labial grooved-rounded spirant; s is vl. alveolar spirant; z is vl. alveo-palatal spirant; l is vl. lateral spirant; j is vl. velar spirant; x is vl. back velar spirant; m is labial nasal; n is dental nasal; i is a high close front vowel; e is a low close front vowel; a is a low open central vowel; o is a mid close back vowel.

386 784 881 2. The restriction as stated to me by various women pertains only to young girls below the age of menarche. Actually, however, none of the above-mentioned young men and women, most of them in their twenties, was allowed to observe.

126 3. Plant specimens are deposited in the Herbarium of The University of Arizona.

386 114 4. The blue "pencil" which McGee describes (McGee 1898: 166) and pictures (McGee 1898: Plate XXVII facing p. 170) is apparently the ʔantezj kóil.

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[For the use of various plants and minerals in the preparation of ?antex) kóil or blue clay used in Seri facial ornamentation, see category 386.]